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A Brief History Of
MARINE CORPS AVIATION



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A BRIEF HISTORY OF MARINE CORPS AVIATION*

Marine Corps aviation had its inception on 22 May 1912, when Lieutenant Alfred A. Cunningham reported to the Naval Aviation Camp, Annapolis, Maryland. The following July, he was ordered from Annapolis to the Burgess Company plant at Marblehead, Massachusetts, where actual flight training was conducted, and soloed on 1 August 1912, after 2 hours and 40 minutes of instructions. Thus Lieutenant Cunningham, whose Naval Aviator Number was 5, became Marine Aviator Number 1.

As early as 1913, he was made a member of the Chambers Board, composed of six naval officers and himself, which was convened to draw up "a comprehensive plan for the organization of a naval aeronautical service," assuring the Marines of a representative in naval aviation almost from the beginning.

(*) The material in this paper for the period through World War II is based upon Capt Edna L. Smith, MCWR, "Aviation Organization in the United States Marine Corps, 1912-1945--- Essays in the History of Naval Air Operations, v. V," ms. monograph, Naval Aviation History Unit, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, n.d. (copy in Aviation Subject File, Historical Branch, HQMC); Robert Sherrod, History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II (Washington: Combat Forces Press, 1952); and historical records of Marine aviation in the Pacific War. The material for the Korean War period is derived from the operational records of Marine units engaged. All original records used are in the custody of the Historical Branch, HQMC.

Naval aviation's early development owed much to its Marine members who participated in some of the earliest experiments--bombing from a naval plane (Bernard L. Smith); taking off by catapult from a battleship underway (Alfred A. Cunningham); and looping a seaplane (Francis T. Evans).

When the United States entered the first World War on 6 April 1917, Marine aviation consisted of only 6 Marine officers designated naval aviators, 1 warrant officer, and 45 enlisted men. Six months later, the First Marine Aeronautic Company was organized and was fated to make history by becoming the first American flying unit of any service to go overseas completely trained and equipped. On 9 January 1918, the Company, of 12 officers and 133 enlisted men, was transferred to Ponta Delgada, on the island of Sao Miguel, for duty, where it flew seaplanes on antisubmarine patrol in the Azores area for the remainder of the war.

Back in the States, Marine aviation was mushrooming. After having utilized fields at Mineola, Cape May, Lake Charles, and Coconut Grove the Marines finally got their own field in April 1918 when the Curtiss Flying Field at Miami was renamed the Marine Flying Field, the first in the history of the Corps.

With the move to Miami came the formation of the 1st Marine Aviation Force composed of a headquarters detachment and four landplane squadrons. This organization was ordered almost immediately to prepare to sail for France. By 30 July 1918,

three Marine squadrons, comprising 101 officers and 657 enlisted men, arrived in France, followed by the fourth in October. Upon their arrival the Marine squadrons became the Day Wing of the Northern Bombing Group while two Navy squadrons made up the Night Wing. That was the first instance of wing and group organization in naval aviation. The group, however, was the higher echelon whereas in World War II the order was reversed.

The Marine pilots, like most American airmen in France, faced a most perplexing problem--no aircraft. While they awaited delivery of their planes they were assigned to British squadrons where they got their first taste of combat in DeHavilland aircraft (DH's). It was not until 23 September that the Marines received their first DH in France.

Although the Armistice came soon after Marine aviation arrived, the Marines performed creditably despite a shortage of planes and time. They shot down at least 4, possibly as many as 12, German planes. They performed the first recorded food-dropping mission when they replenished a French regiment isolated for several days in the front lines on the Western Front. For that accomplishment three pilots were awarded the Distinguished Service Medal; their observers received the Navy Cross, at that time a lower rated decoration. Two Medals of Honor were awarded a pilot (2dLt Ralph Talbot) and his observer (GySgt Robert Robinson) for shooting down two enemy planes against overwhelming odds.

In World War I a total of 282 officers and 2,180 enlisted men served in Marine aviation. Of this number, about one half got overseas.

Shortly after its return from France, Marine air began demobilizing. In February 1919, the 1st Marine Aviation Force was disbanded at Miami, and the following month witnessed the dissolution of the First Marine Aeronautic Company which had served in the Azores. Remaining personnel at Miami were transferred in the summer of 1919 to Parris Island and Quantico, and the Marine Flying Field at Miami was abandoned on 25 September. The following year, Marine aviation had but 67 pilots aboard and suffered a still further reduction in 1921 when its pilot strength dropped to 43.

Yet, between World Wars the Marine Corps with its aviation was the only United States military service that actually saw combat. Marine air served in Santo Domingo from February 1919 until July 1924; in Haiti from March 1919 to August 1934; and in Nicaragua from 1927 to 1933. Throughout those years the handful of Marine pilots were not only experiencing combat but were also contributing radically new tactics to both ground and air warfare. In Nicaragua, Marine pilots led by Major Ross Rowell were the first to use dive-bombing (a technique earlier developed by Lt L. M. H. Sanderson) against an organized enemy (Sandino's rebels); again in Nicaragua, they were the first to employ air-to-ground communications in combat; and there they were the first to transport troops and supplies by air.

Marine pilots evacuated wounded in Haiti and Santo Domingo in the early 1920's, utilizing two modified DH's designed by a Marine aviator. But the most well known of the evacuation mission occurred during the fighting in Nicaragua when Lieutenant, later General, Christian F. Schilt, on 6-8 January 1928, made ten hair-raising flights, under fire, landing on a makeshift airfield in Quilali, to rescue 18 seriously wounded Marines who had been ambushed by the enemy. For his "almost super-human skill" Schilt was awarded the Medal of Honor.

The first time Marine air ever served in the Pacific was when 10 pilots and 90 enlisted men of Flight L, 4th Squadron, (later designated Observation Squadron 1-M) reached Guam on 17 March 1921. Flying seaplanes, those Marine pilots performed outpost duty on Guam for ten years. However, most of this squadron had its Guam service interrupted for duty even farther west when in early 1927 a Chinese civil war threatened foreigners in Shanghai, Peking, and other cities. Elements of the Guam squadron were shipped to Shanghai in April and were joined the following month by Marine fighter elements dispatched from San Diego. These units eventually became Fighter Squadron 6-M and Observation Squadron 10-M. For the next 18 months, Marine pilots flew 3,818 reconnaissance sorties around Tientsin to keep a watchful eye on the Chinese antagonists. After the threat to foreigners had abated the personnel of the Guam squadron returned to that island and the other air units returned to the States.

At home during those years of so-called peace, Marine aviators ardently and arduously labored to increase their knowledge of and proficiency in aeronautics. They flew record-breaking flights, established speed records, won safety awards, dispatched medicine and supplies to areas stricken by earthquakes and hurricanes, and experimented in blind-flying, aerial cartography and photography--preparing themselves for a future illustrious role.

Although it was not until 1925 that Marine aviation appeared at all in the annual schedule of the Naval Aeronautical Organization, it had been considered from its creation as an integral part of the naval forces. As naval tactics changed, it became necessary for Marine aeronautical organization and aviation tactics to change also. From 1931 to 1934, VS-14M and VS-15M, the first Marine squadrons to become part of the fleet air organization, were aboard the carriers Saratoga and Lexington.

On 8 December 1933, a step of vital importance was taken with the organization of the Fleet Marine Force, a unit constituted as an integral part of the United States fleet. The development of the Fleet Marine Force brought about many changes in the organization of Marine aviation, among which was the laying of less stress on expeditionary duty and more on the seizure of advanced naval bases in the event of war.

The next organizational change of importance to Marine aviation came in 1935 when the aviation section was divorced from the Division of Operations and Training and became an independent section under the Major General Commandant. On 1 April 1936 it became a division under a Director of Aviation. The director of the new division served as an adviser to the Commandant on all aviation matters, and as a liaison officer between the Marine Corps and the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics. Unlike the Marine Corps infantry and artillery, which drew their equipment from both Army and Navy (in addition to supplying much of their own), Marine aviation depended solely on the Navy for its aircraft and all other aviation gear.

On 30 June 1939, there were 210 officers and 1,142 enlisted men on active duty with Marine aviation. By June 1940 the number had risen to 1,860. In June 1940, Congress authorized the Navy's 10,000-plane program of which Marine aviation was allotted 1,167. Plans were made for the establishment of 4 groups of 11 squadrons each. Following landing exercises in 1941, it was estimated that a single division making an amphibious landing would require 12 fighter, 8 dive-bomber, 2 observation, and 4 utility squadrons. But so great a number of squadrons was a long time materializing.

Although the 1st and 2d Marine Aircraft Wings were commissioned in July 1941, when war came five months later there was still only one group in each wing--Marine Aircraft Group 11 at

Quantico and Marine Aircraft Group 21 with some units at Ewa and others at Wake Island.

The Pearl Harbor attack liquidated all but one of the 48 Marine aircraft at Ewa--the one to escape was a transport sent to Ford Island for repairs. The personnel of Marine Aircraft Group 21 organized and directed the defense of their field so well that they were able to keep it open throughout the attack, thus rendering assistance to Army and Navy aircraft unable to reach their own stations for servicing; they downed a Japanese plane with a ground gun; and they had a lower percentage of battle casualties (4 killed, 13 wounded) than any other field or station under attack in the area.

The last of the 12 Marine planes at Wake was destroyed on 22 December. Yet, with a maximum of only five planes, seven having been destroyed in the initial attack on 8 December, Wake pilots sank the destroyer Kisaragi and shot down seven planes before their last aircraft was destroyed. Then the 20 unwounded survivors of the squadron's complement of 61 joined the ground troops and fought as infantrymen until they were killed or captured.

Shortly after mid-December, 17 Marine SB2U's (Vindicators), of VMSB (Marine Dive Bomber Squadron)-231, led by a Navy PBY, reached Midway after a spectacular flight of less than ten hours from Pearl--the longest mass overwater single-engined flight on the books up to that time. On Christmas Day 1941, Midway

received its first fighters when 14 Marine F2A-3's (Brewster Buffaloes) of Marine Fighter Squadron 221 joined the dive-bombers there.

Except for a skirmish of four Marine pilots with a reconnaissance plane from the Marshalls, which they shot down, Midway was in the doldrums until the following June which witnessed the Battle of Midway. Outnumbered and outclassed by the Japanese Zero, Marine pilots, nevertheless, were unsurpassed in valor. With inferior planes they valiantly met the first savage onslaught of Japan's superior aircraft. Of the 25 fighter pilots only 10 survived the first brief encounter; 13 of the 27 dive-bombers and their crews were lost. Captain Richard E. Fleming, a Marine pilot, posthumously received the Medal of Honor for diving his flaming bomber onto the deck of the Japanese cruiser Mikuma and setting fires which so badly crippled her that Navy carrier-planes easily sank her.

The importance of aviation to Marine tactics was graphically shown at Guadalcanal where one of the first objectives of the assault was a partially completed Japanese airfield, later renamed Henderson Field. Appalling shortages of everything earned Guadalcanal the name "Operation Shoestring." Despite gross inadequacies to its needs, Marine aviation based on Henderson Field devastated the overwhelming numbers of the highly-vaunted Japanese air force and exploded the myth that the Japanese pilots and Zeros were invincible.

Upward from Guadalcanal, Marine planes winged their way, shattering every Japanese-forged link in the Solomons chain: the Russells, New Georgia, Vella Lavella, and Bougainville, whence they bedeviled "impregnable" Rabaul until none of its five airfields was operable. Through the Gilberts, Marshalls, Carolines, Marianas, and Palaus the thunder of the Marine Corsairs--the Japanese called them Whistling Death--relentlessly pursued the enemy. From carriers they first hit the Philippines and, later, four Marine Aircraft Groups supported Army troops there. In February 1945, Marine carrier-aviation supported its own troops at Iwo Jima for the first time in history and struck Tokyo itself from carriers. From the Emperor's own backyard, Okinawa, came the final blow.

Marine pilots shot down their first enemy plane at Wake--their last at Okinawa. Between those dates Marine aviation scored 2,355 "shoot downs" and produced 121 aces, 5 of whom downed 20 or more aircraft--Boyington, Foss, Hanson, Walsh, and Aldrich. During World War II, the Marine Corps had as its peak number of units, 5 air wings, 31 aircraft groups, and 145 aircraft squadrons. The largest number of personnel assigned at one time to Marine aviation was 125,162.

On 7 September 1945, the airfield at Yokosuka was occupied by Marine Aircraft Group 31, which became the first aviation unit to operate on Japanese soil. Shortly after the surrender, Marine aviation units in the Philippines moved to North China to carry out their peacetime mission of occupying the country

with some units remaining until January 1949. But it was not too long afterward--18 months--that Marine aviation was back in the Pacific to stop a new foe.

Meanwhile, in the short-lived peace between 1945 and 1950, Marine aviation returned to the task of peacetime preparedness. Principal among the many phases of training that went ever onward was familiarization with operations from carriers, a duty actually introduced to Marines, on a routine basis, late in World War II. The innovation of the helicopter revitalized and reshaped the role of Marine aviation in amphibious warfare in the Nuclear Age. Once again Marine air introduced a new type of aerial war--this time in Korea.

Korean hostilities commenced on 25 June 1950 and by 5 July Marine air units were alerted for combat duty. By the end of July elements of MAG-33 were already in Japan. On 3 August, the first Marine aviation mission against the new enemy was flown by a carrier-based squadron.

Marine aviation gave an outstanding performance in Korea --first when they went into action in support of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade in the Pusan Perimeter. Next came the Inchon landing by the 1st Marine Division with squadrons of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing giving effective close air support, flying from carriers during the amphibious assault and later based at Kimpo Airfield. Following the collapse of North Korean resistance in early October 1950, air-lifted

elements of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing occupied the seaport town of Wonsan. During the latter part of November and early part of December 1950, when the 1st Marine Division was fighting its way through hordes of Chinese Communist Forces from the Chosin Reservoir area to Hamhung, aircraft of the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps supplied the Division by air-drops and evacuated more than 5,000 casualties. Marine aircraft, aided by those of the Navy, provided brilliant close air support, an important factor in the 1st Marine Division's breakout of the enemy trap and its fighting withdrawal to Hamhung.

Between August 1950, and 27 July 1953, units of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew more than 118,000 sorties, of which more than 39,500 were close-support missions. Marine helicopter squadrons during the same period evacuated almost 10,000 personnel.

Since the end of the Korean War elements of the 1st Wing have remained on station in the Far East where they bolstered the air defense of Taiwan in the latter part of 1958. The 2d Marine Aircraft Wing, stationed at Cherry Point, North Carolina, has regularly provided squadrons for duty aboard carriers of the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. These units as well as Marine helicopters and airlift transports figured as part of the Marine Corps force-in-readiness in the Lebanon operation in the summer of 1958. The 3d Wing remains in El Toro, California, also providing squadrons for carrier duty.

Appendix 1

DIRECTORS OF MARINE CORPS AVIATION⁽¹⁾

Maj	Alfred A. Cunningham	17 Nov 1919	-	12 Dec 1920
LtCol	Thomas C. Turner	13 Dec 1920	-	2 Mar 1925
Maj	Edward H. Brainard	3 Mar 1925	-	9 May 1929
Col	Thomas C. Turner	10 May 1929	-	28 Oct 1931(2)
Maj	Roy S. Geiger	6 Nov 1931	-	29 May 1935
Col	Ross E. Rowell	30 May 1935	-	10 Mar 1939
BriGen	Ralph J. Mitchell	11 Mar 1939	-	29 Mar 1943(3)
MajGen	Roy S. Geiger	13 May 1943	-	15 Oct 1943
BriGen	Louis E. Woods	15 Oct 1943	-	17 Jul 1944
MajGen	Field Harris	18 Jul 1944	-	24 Feb 1948
MajGen	William J. Wallace	24 Feb 1948	-	1 Sep 1950
BriGen	Clayton C. Jerome	1 Sep 1950	-	1 Apr 1952
LtGen	William O. Brice	1 Apr 1952	-	31 Jul 1955
LtGen	Christian F. Schilt	1 Aug 1955	-	31 Mar 1957
LtGen	Verne J. McCaul	1 Apr 1957	-	2 Dec 1957(4)
MajGen	Samuel S. Jack	14 Jan 1958	-	20 Feb 1958
MajGen	John C. Munn	21 Feb 1958	-	14 Dec 1959
MajGen	Arthur F. Binney	15 Dec 1959	-	

(1) On 1 Apr 1936 the title of the senior aviator attached to Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps was changed from Officer in Charge, Aviation, to Director of Aviation.

(2) Hiatus due to accidental death of Col Turner in Haiti on 28 Oct 1931.

(3) Col Clayton C. Jerome was Acting Director 30 Mar - 12 May 1943.

(4) Col John L. Smith was Acting Director 3 Dec 1957 - 13 Jan 1958.

Appendix 2

AIRCRAFT LETTER AND NUMBER SYSTEM OF IDENTIFICATION

Marine aircraft can be identified by the following letter-number system introduced in 1923:

The first letter indicates the type of plane, the second the manufacturer with a number appended standing for the modification of the aircraft, e.g., an FF-2 is identified as a (F) fighter, by (F) Grumman, (2) second modification. A number inserted between type and manufacturer's letters indicates the model number of the designer's aircraft in the same class (the first model or design number "1" always omitted), e.g., an F6C-1 is identified as a (F) fighter, (6) sixth model, by (C) Curtiss, (1) first modification.

Suffixes have had to be added when aircraft have been equipped for special missions or have certain modifications, e.g., an SBD-4P is defined as a (SB) scout-bomber, by (D) Douglas, (4) fourth modification, equipped for (P) photography.

TYPE LETTERS

A - Attack; ambulance	P - Patrol
B - Bomber	PB - Patrol-bomber
F - Fighter	R - Transport (Multiengine)
G - Transport (single engine)	S - Scout
H - Helicopter; hospital	SB - Scout-bomber
J - Transport and general utility	SN - Scout-trainer
JR - Utility-transport	SO - Scout-observation
N - Trainer	T - Torpedo and bombing; trainer
O - Observation	TB - Torpedo-bomber
OS - Observation-scout	U - Utility
	X - Experimental

MANUFACTURERS' SYMBOLS

The year shown opposite the manufacturer indicated the first time that particular manufacturer's symbol appeared in the designation of aircraft assigned to the Marines.

A - Atlantic (1927)	E - Bellanca (1923)
A - Brewster (1936)	E - Cessna (1951)
B - Beech (1941)	E - Piper (1942)
B - Boeing (1925)	F - Columbia (1944)
C - Cessna (1943)	F - Fairchild (Canada) (1944)
C - Curtis (1926) (Curtis Wright)	F - Grumman (1934)
D - Douglas (1923)	G - Great Lakes (1935)

H - Howard (1942)
 H - McDonnell (1947)
 J - North American (1940)
 K - Fairchild (U. S.)
 (1943)
 K - Kaman (1952)
 L - Bell (1951)
 L - Loening (1926)
 M - General Motors (1943)
 M - Glenn L. Martin (1922)
 N - Naval Aircraft Factory
 (1942)
 O - Lockheed (1939)
 P - Piasecki (1952)
 P - Pitcairn (1931)
 P - Spartan (1937)
 Q - Fairchild (1950)

R - Ford (1929)
 S - Sikorsky (1931)
 S - Stearman (1944)
 T - New Standard (1931)
 T - Northrop (1946)
 T - Timm (1942)
 U - Chance Vought (1927)
 (Vought-Sikorsky)
 V - Lockheed (1950)
 V - Vega (1943)
 V - Vultee (1943)
 W - Canadian Cart Foundry
 (1944)
 W - Dayton-Wright (1925)
 X - Cox-Klemin (1926)
 Y - Consolidated (1926)
 Y - Consolidated-Vultee (1942)

SUFFIX LETTERS

A - Amphibious
 B - Special Armament
 C - Carrier operation of
 noncarrier aircraft
 D - Drone control
 E - Special radar; special
 electronics
 F - Flagship
 H - Hospital
 L - Winterized
 M - Missile carrier
 N - Night; all-weather

N(A) - All-weather stripped
 for day operations
 NL - All-weather and winterized
 P - Photographic
 Q - Countermeasures
 R - Transport-personnel/
 support
 T - Training
 W - Special search; air
 warning; airborne early
 warning
 Z - Administrative

Appendix 3

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Maj Charles W. Boggs, Jr., USMC. Marine Aviation in the Philippines. Washington: Historical Division, Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps, 1951.

Capt John A. DeChant, USMCR. Devilbirds--The Story of United States Marine Corps Aviation in World War II. New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1947.

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